

BIGARD

Theological Studies

JUL. - DEC. 2019

VOL. 39 NO. 2

ISSN: 2636 - 5936

Online: 2636 - 5928



A Journal of Bigard Memorial Seminary, Enugu - Nigeria

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ISSN

Print: 2636-5936

Online: 2636-5928

SNAAP PRESS NIG. LTD., Enugu

Phone: 08035507916

MADE FROM A RIB: AN UNDERSTANDING OF GEN. 2:18-24

By

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1. Introduction

This paper focuses on two related issues. Firstly, it gives a key to understanding the highly controversial text of Gen. 2:18-24 in order, secondly, to elucidate the main object of the text which is to explain the identity of woman and her role in the human family. The text says:

Then the LORD God said, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper that befits him [translation mine]." So out of the ground the LORD God formed every animal of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name. The man gave names to all cattle, and to the birds of the air, and to every animal of the field; but for the man there was not found a helper as his partner. So the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then he took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. And the rib that the LORD God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. Then the man said, "This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; this one shall be called Woman, for out of Man this one was taken." Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh (Gen. 2:18-24, NRSV).

The objective of this text is not the creation of Adam. The creation of the man has been described without much detail in only one verse. "The LORD God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being" (Gen. 2:7). A description of the garden in which the Lord God kept the man followed: a place filled with every kind of pleasant tree and watered by four rivers (Gen. 2:8-15). Having put the man in the garden, and with a specific task to till it and keep it (Gen. 2:15), the text sets out to explain why and how God created woman. A description of the creation of woman

is given within the context of the relationship of the man to all other created things and in response to a divinely discovered human need for companionship.

Through the centuries, the interpretation of Gen. 2:18-25 by the Church Fathers and along with it, the entire story of Eden in Gen. 3, has influenced the dominant theological anthropology in the Church's teaching. It has also determined the understanding of the identity of man and woman, and in fact the way the woman's role is described in many societies and cultures. This essay continues in the next section by placing the question of the relationship of man and woman in historical perspective. It will thereafter proffer an interpretation of Gen. 2:18-24, which befits the metaphor of a rib.

2. Perceptions of the Identity of Women in History

2.1 Interpretation of the Eden Story by the Church Fathers

Ancient patristic and scholastic interpretations of the Eden story in Gen. 2-3 consider significant aspects of the creation of woman and of her role in the story of the Fall. According to them, the image of God is the prerogative of the man. Since the woman was created from the rib of Adam, they deny her of theomorphic form,¹ rate her as inferior to man, of being morally and emotionally weak and dependent.² The woman is, therefore, destined to the domestic sphere where her role is defined strictly in procreative and servile terms, to be redeemed only through child-bearing.³ The most negative of all ideas about women are found in the works of Tertullian and Thomas Aquinas.

Tertullian's, Thomas Aquinas' and other Church Fathers' interpretation of Gen. 2-3 must be understood within the context of the prejudices and concerns of their time, their distorted views of woman which are partly based in pagan philosophy⁴ and not Scripture, and the early Church's deep suspicion of sexuality. It

¹ They understood Eph. 5:22-24 and Col. 3:8 as saying that the image of God in the human being is the prerogative of the man.

² Ambrose, *De Institutione Virginis* IV, 25-31; Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, q.92, a.1; q.99, a.2; q.115, a.3,4.

³ Cf. St. Ambrose, *De Institutione Virginis* IV, 25-31.

⁴ For instance, Thomas Aquinas' ideas about women were influenced by Aristotle's infamous affirmation that "the female is a misbegotten male" (*De Gener.* II, 3).

also appears that women were wielding so much influence in the society and in the Church so much so that patristic (ca. 150 AD to 500 AD) and scholastic (ca. 1100 AD to 1700 AD) Fathers sought to restrict their influence. It was primarily their cultural context which influenced their dismissive views of women and not the teachings of Christ.

These interpretations opened doors to a long history of wrongs done to women and to their personal identity and dignity by human cultures. Women were denied access to education and many societal roles that were strictly reserved for men. Women have also suffered oppression, disregard and disparagement through the centuries in different cultural contexts. The picture began to change from around the end of the 20th century when historical and cultural transformations in the perception of women began. This is thanks to greater knowledge got from science and technology, which proves the equality of man and woman in the procreative process. Earlier cultures, which downgraded and militated against women, have been blamed for the ignorance of these modern developments.

2.2 Historical and Cultural Transformation in the Perception of Women

The history of humanity has recorded tremendous changes in the perception of women, in the understanding of the relationship between man and woman and in the definition of sex-based roles. In nearly every nation, culture, society, and in every religion, women have been regarded as inferior to men, weak (incapable of real strength), lacking in intelligence, and, therefore, incapable of contributing anything to the society. Until the 20th century, women virtually everywhere were excluded from the key aspects of modernity; the woman was confined to the family where her role was defined strictly in procreative terms. She was denied many of the opportunities given to men to achieve self-fulfillment through education, work, political activity and choice of life partner. Within the family where her roles are defined, the woman was an object of pleasure and exploitation, and her fortune was determined by her ability for procreation and service to others.

One can fully appreciate the interesting transformations in the life of the woman which became possible from the latter half of the 20th century. For centuries, religious, political and social

institutions have advocated for the respect of the legitimate rights of women to education and to the promotion of their wellbeing as human beings equal in dignity and rights with men. Greater responsibility for this change is given to the socio-cultural changes which came with feminist movements but also, to a greater extent, with the modernization of Western societies.⁵ The sudden entry of women into public life caused an upheaval in all the traditional male habits in the family, society and Church. John XXIII lists this phenomenon among the signs of the times.⁶ It became possible for women to study, attend university, acquire the right to individual freedom, and, little by little, gain access to all the professions that were said to belong to men. In many cultural environments, and no longer only in the Western world, modernity is leading to the collapse of sex-based roles.

Thanks to these developments, biological differences are no longer the decisive factors for defining the relationship between men and women. These turn out of events were appreciated by John Paul II, in his Letter to Women, where he says,

I cannot fail to express my admiration for those women of goodwill who have devoted their lives to defending the dignity of womanhood by fighting for their basic social, economic and political rights, demonstrating courageous initiative at a time when this was considered extremely inappropriate, the sign of a lack of femininity, a manifestation of exhibitionism and even a sin!⁷

The challenge which this topic constitutes for the Church is the topic of a study seminar organized by the Pontifical Council for the Laity in 2006. A renowned member of this Council says in her paper at the seminar:

To respond to the current challenges of a new evangelization and of the construction of a culture of love at this time in

⁵ Cf. Lucetta Scaraffia, "Socio-Cultural Changes in Women's Lives" in *Pontificium Consilium Pro Laicis, Study Seminar on Men and Women: Diversity and Mutual Complementarity* (Roma: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2006), p. 15 (pp. 15-22).

⁶ John XXIII, Encyclical Letter, *Pacem in Terris*, n. 22.

⁷ John Paul II, *Letter to Women* (June 29, 1995), 6: *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 87 (1995), p. 756.

history, it is fitting that the Church continue to be committed to helping women and men to be aware of their identity, dignity and mission, and to strengthen interrelationships based on mutual respect and appreciation, in recognition of the existing differences and in dialogue.⁸

Joan Chittister suggests that since the Church through patristic and scholastic interpretations of the Bible baptized the anti-woman attitudes and situations created by primitive misunderstanding, it is the Church who must redeem the integrity of the woman from the scourge of culture.⁹ The next paragraph attempts an interpretation of the identity of woman in Gen. 2:18-24.

3. Creation of the Woman in Gen. 2:18-24

Gen. 2:18-24 is the second part of the creation account that is found in Gen. 2:4-25. The first part, Gen. 2:4-17, is a description of the garden of Eden, of the creation of man and of his task in relation to the garden. The second part, vv. 18-24, describes the crisis that led to the creation of woman. Gen. 2:25 is the conclusion that describes the state of fellowship of the couple.

The section, 2:18-24, begins with a divine assessment of the inappropriateness of God's earlier plan to let the man take care of the garden alone. Seen against the background of Gen. 1-3, this divine assessment in v. 18, "it is not good...", is a divergence from the divine evaluation that concludes the first creation account, "God saw all he had made, and indeed it was very good" (Gen. 1:31).¹⁰ Although the statement in 2:18 is presented as an after-

⁸ Maria Eugenia Diaz de Pfennich, "Participation and Collaboration in the Life of the Church" in *Pontificium Consilium Pro Laicis*, Study Seminar on *Men and Women: Diversity and Mutual Complementarity*, Roma: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2006, p. 178 (pp. 175-180). De Pfennich is a member of the Pontifical Council for the Laity and of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace. At the time of this Study Seminar in 2006, she was the President of the World Union of Catholic Women's Organization (WUCWO) and Vice President of the Conference of International Catholic Organizations.

⁹ Joan Chittister (O.S.B.) used to be the Prioress of the Benedictine Sisters of Erie, Pennsylvania. Cf. her *Women, Ministry and the Church*, New York: Paulist Press, 1983, p. 2.

¹⁰ In the first and second creation stories, the Hebrew word "tov" (translated as 'good') designates what corresponds with the cosmic order and what is in harmony with God's original design for creation. Cf. Nwachukwu, *Creation – Covenant Scheme*, p. 58.

thought in God's plan,¹¹ it functions like a dramatic suspense which aims to draw attention to the proper understanding of the identities of man and woman in God's design and their relationship to each other. In fact, the meaning of the Hebrew word *toʿv* (in the phrase – "it is not good...") as desired effect of God's action shows that the man's lonely situation in the garden does not correspond to what God intended.

The man whom God created and put in the garden was found to be lonely. After the creation of man, every of God's subsequent actions seemed to be out of extra-ordinary concern for the man. Creation was still ongoing. Man's loneliness was due to absence of a companion that befits him. Two words describe the quality and suitability of a fitting companion for man, *'ezer* and *kenegdo*.¹² The noun *'ezer*, means helper or support. Man's need of a helper might suggest that he is in a helpless state, but this idea is dismissed by the next phrase *kenegdo*. This is a compound phrase that literally means "as before him" which means "someone or something that matches him or is equivalent to him". The expected help is neither that of assistance to a helpless individual nor the protection of a stronger person or assistance in daily work, but the mutual support companionship provides.¹³ So, God starts to experiment on man's happiness by creating other creatures, "... and brought them to the man to see what he would call them" (Gen. 2:19).

The creatures that God set out to create, animals of the field and birds of the air (vv. 19-20), were found to be not a good match for the man. The giving of names was a way of establishing relationship between the man and the creatures. "The man gave names to all cattle, and to the birds of the air, and to every animal of the field; but for the man there was not found a helper as befits him" (Gen. 2:20). It established only a relationship of dominion.

¹¹ A similar literary device is found in Gen 6:5, which says that God is sorry to have made mankind. The story that follows this divine evaluation represents the view point that accords with God's plan.

¹² *K'negdo* is a composite noun formed from the preposition *K'* (as, like) and *neged* (before, in front of, opposite) and the third person masculine singular pronominal suffix (him), which is translated as 'counterpart' or 'corresponding to him'.

¹³ Cf. Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*. Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 1, Texas: Word Books Publisher, 1987, p. 68.

"Whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name" (Gen. 2:19). The act of giving names further confers identity to creatures. Animals and birds are formed from the dust of the earth, just as the man is, yet none qualifies as man's companion. God, therefore, resolved to create woman in a different way.

4. Made from Man's Rib: Woman in the Design of God

The creation of woman, from man's rib, perfectly completes God's search for a befitting companion for man. What might possibly be God's reason for using the rib and not any other material or any other human organ to create the woman? Patristic interpretation of this idea gives the woman away as a being inferior and subordinated to man. This interpretation ignores the intended meaning of the metaphor. In human beings, the rib is one of twelve slender curved bones attached to the vertebral column which form the rib cage around the human chest. The rib cage provides a strong framework unto which the muscles of the shoulder girdle, chest, upper abdomen and back can attach. The ribs enable the lungs to expand and they facilitate breathing by expanding the chest cavity.¹⁴ In summary, the rib gives protection and support to vital human organs and aids respiration. These are vital needs of a human being.

The text Gen. 2:18-24 has simply said that the woman is to the man what the rib is to the human body. It is, therefore, unquestionably clear why the text defines the woman in relation to the man.¹⁵ It is also significant that the description of woman here has no sexual connotation. The background of the text might be family and the characters are presented within the patriarchal culture of the time; this is a text that highlights the woman's immense contribution to the human family. In Hebrew socio-cultural world, the woman does not usually choose her husband but she is given to a man. Similarly, the man's passive role in marriage is represented as deep sleep. The role of the woman was also determined by the patriarchal family system where she is wife and mother.¹⁶ While the rib defines her as of the same substance with the man (bone of my bone), it also refers to her preeminent support for the man and the family.

¹⁴ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rib>.

¹⁵ See especially Gen. 2:24-25; 3:8, 17; 4:1, 17.

¹⁶ Cf. O.J. Baab, "Woman" in *The Interpreters Dictionary of the Bible*, vol. 4, Nashville: Abingdon Press, p. 864 [pp. 864-867].

Gen. 2: 21-24 gathers most of the ideas about woman's role which are scattered in different parts of the Bible. The two words 'helper' and 'rib' are vigorous descriptions of the kind of support that woman is to the family. The woman has considerable influence in the family. Prov. 31:10-31 describes a characteristic resourcefulness that is unique to her gender. Through her economic activities and foresighted enterprises, she provides for her husband and household in season and out of season (Gen. 24:11, 13-16; 19-20; 27:9, 14).

Gen. 2:18-24 reveals one of the most fundamental truths about the man-woman relationship in creation. John Paul II's interpretation of this text differs considerably from the arguments found in Patristic interpretations, which had been used across the centuries to promote the idea that woman is inferior and subordinate to man. In place of this, there is an understanding of the text in terms of the complementarity and completeness of humanity. According to John Paul II, the text depicts the man, lost in the midst of the garden and in search of a subjective definition of himself. In the creation of woman, the man overcomes his solitude through a return to non-being (analogy of sleep) to the discovery of communion, which truly defines the image of God in the human being.¹⁷

The woman represents the man's other or complete self – his rib, "bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh" – which emphasizes their homogeneity. She represents creation's fullness and fulfillment, indispensable for man's self-realization and for creation's completeness.¹⁸ Without her, the task of life is simply to care for the garden (Gen. 2:15); but with her, man realizes that the full meaning of life is achieved through communion, through relationship in which one exists with and for someone. In the words of John Paul II, "the presence of the feminine element, alongside the male element and together with it, signifies an enrichment for man in the whole perspective of his history, including the history of salvation".¹⁹

¹⁷ John Paul II, *The Theology of the Body. Human Love in the Divine Plan* (Boston: Pauline Books Media, 1997), pp. 44-46.

¹⁸ Cf. Katrina J. Zeno, *Discovering the Feminine Genius: Every Woman's Journey* (Boston: Pauline Publications, 2010), p. 34.

¹⁹ John Paul II, *Theology of the Body*, p. 49.

Gen. 3:20 gives another characteristic of the woman which complements the ideas expressed in the foregoing paragraphs. It is the description of the woman as *Eve*, meaning, the mother of the living (Gen. 3:20). This implies that by nature, the woman is created to extend and nurture life in others. Whether married or not, she is imbued with maternal instinct, and this is proper to her special mission. Women have the natural propensity to nurturing and preserving the life of others, even at the cost of their own lives. They are structured in their being to promote a culture of life and of its preservation in creation.

5. Conclusion

In Gen. 2:18-24, one encounters *ishah*, the woman, who is not presented like *Eve* of Gen. 3, even though both of them represent the same dramatic person. *Ishah* is not like the highly controversial and embattled biblical figure of Gen. 3 who is model of disobedience and deceiver who joined forces with the serpent to cause evil in human history, and whose actions originated the negative view of the feminine gender. This woman of Gen. 2 is same flesh and bone of the husband, a befitting match to him and a wonderful support for the family. She is protective, enterprising and resourceful.

The text of Gen. 2:18-24, therefore, explains what is proper to a woman's mission according to God's plan, which is, that the good or overall wellbeing of creation is not complete without her.²⁰ Moreover, since she is made from the rib, every human institution, especially the human family, needs to be blessed by the touch of a woman's maternal support in order to experience wholeness. According to John Paul II, "the presence of the feminine element, alongside the male element and together with it, signifies an enrichment for man in the whole perspective of his history, including the history of salvation."²¹

²⁰ The meaning of the text will elude anyone whose interpretation is guided by any form of cultural bias. This text should be understood in the light of the Yahwist attempt to explain the origin of the frustrations which human beings encounter in life.

²¹ Cf. John Paul II, *The Theology of the Body. Human Love in the Divine Plan* (Boston: Pauline Books Media, 1997), p. 49.